

The Art of the Article

How To Write Words and Influence People

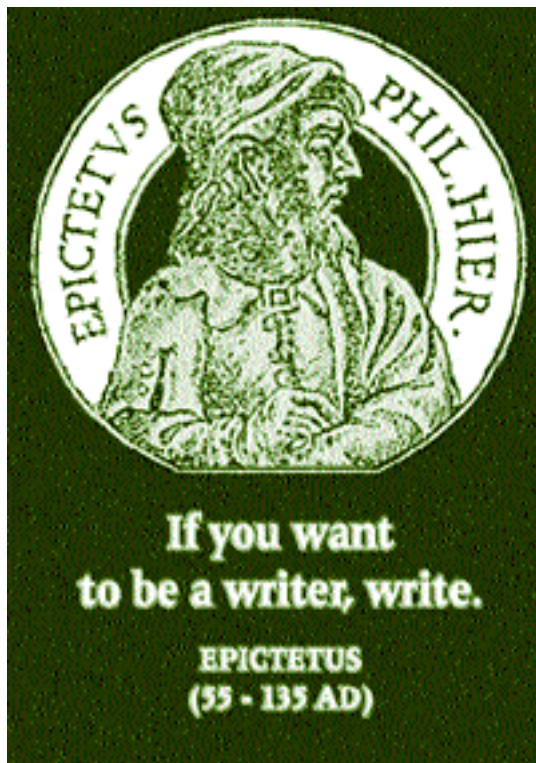
Capt. Dan Ward, USAF

It was bound to happen eventually. I predicted it some time ago, but I wasn't expecting it to happen so soon. And yet, after writing 11 articles about program management for this magazine and its predecessor, I suddenly find myself writing about—writing. Specifically, I want to offer a challenge, some encouragement, and a little advice for program managers who want to get published. I particularly hope it will be helpful to all the lieutenants and captains out there; although, of course, everyone is invited to join in the fun.

Have Something To Say

Let's get right down to it: if you are going to write, you need to have something to say, preferably something interesting. That should go without saying, but apparently some people need to be told. How do you find something interesting to say? Well, the cliché advice to new writers is to "write what you know," and that's not a bad place to start. The other option is to write about things you *don't* know. An article can be a great forum for exploring a new topic or issue, and in the process of learning something new, you might produce something worth sharing with the rest of us.

In either case, whether writing from what you know or from what you don't know, make sure you keep it relevant to your audience's interests and needs. There ought to be within your article some new contribution that helps, illuminates, educates, or challenges your readers. Don't write simply to be published, but to be read. Before putting



pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), ask whether anyone else will care. Fortunately, if you care, chances are pretty good someone else will too.

If you are still stuck for a topic, the "curse method" may help generate ideas. This approach involves watching for instances of people cursing or complaining. Inevitably, the root of that complaint will be a problem begging for a solution. Bam!—there's your article idea. Just describe the problem and propose a way to address it, in an interesting as well as relevant manner.

One more thing: try fresh approaches. For instance, your story will be more interesting if your logic is surprising, not obvious. Start your readers down a familiar path, then take a new twist.

Do your homework beforehand, read up on a particular topic, then respond with a new, unique perspective. Unless of course you want to be boring and predictable—but that likely won't get you published.

... And Say It Well

As the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé observed, "You don't make a poem with ideas, but with words." The same is true of articles in *Defense AT&L* and elsewhere. Once you've selected your topic and sketched out the idea, you will be faced with the slightly daunting task of actually producing 2,000 words, more or less. That's where the real work begins. You've got to come up with some actual *bons mots*, making sure they are as *bons* as possible.

If you want to write well, start by reading well. Truth is, the more you read, the better you'll write. Exposing yourself to good writers helps establish a sense of what good writing looks and sounds like. And speaking of exposure, make sure someone reads your article before you submit it to an editor. Better yet, find a small crew of trusted reviewers who will give *honest* feedback about the quality,

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readability and overall value of your work. It's not easy, so search for those who will tell you what's wrong with your article, not simply what's good.

Even a brilliant concept can be destroyed by poor execution, so as you write, keep it tight (and make it rhyme ... some of the time). Pay close attention to syntax, grammar, and word choice; and get some help if you need it. (We all do from time to time). Put words on paper, lots of words, and don't be afraid if they don't sound quite right at first, because you can always edit them later. Once you've got something to work with, ruthlessly delete the unnecessary, irrelevant, and redundant bits. George Orwell advised writers, "If it is possible to cut a word out, cut it out." (For my money, the horrid word "that" can almost always be removed.) It's tough to delete something ~~that~~ you've written, but it's worth gritting your teeth and doing it because the end result is almost always a more focused and readable product.

Everyone Loves Metaphors

In the animated movie *Shrek*, Eddie Murphy's Donkey character famously observed, "Everyone loves parfaits." Well, metaphors are the literary equivalent of parfaits: multi-layered and delicious. Everyone loves a good metaphor because it can provide a memorable and easily digestible representation of an important truth. Of course, metaphors can also be like ogres and onions: when they're bad, they stink. The point is to be careful in selecting your metaphor, and don't overdo it or it will topple like a too-tall parfait in the hands of a clumsy waiter, and you'll end up with literary whipped cream, berries, and whatnot all over the place. See what I mean?

How Do You Find The Time?

Yes, writing a three-page article can be a real drain on your time. I personally follow Dave Barry's model and literally spend *minutes* each month producing these pieces. All kidding aside, it really can be tough to make the time to write, and it often takes me months to cobble together enough minutes to complete an article.

My trick is to do most of my writing at 30,000 feet, as I'm jetting off to an exotic TDY locale like Omaha. It's about the only distraction-free time I have these days. (And yes, this means I usually skip the in-flight movie.) Being airborne may be a perfect muse for an Air Force officer like me, but others may find writing easier with their boots on the ground. When I'm not TDY, there's a



little kabob restaurant down the street that gets my creative juices flowing during all-too-rare long lunches. And believe it or not, I sketched out the idea for this article in the gym. Good thing I had a notebook nearby (hint, hint).

My other trick is to write several articles in parallel. Just because I haven't finished my first article is no reason I can't start writing a new one. At any given time, I tend to have three or four articles in various stages of completion. Some linger in a half-done limbo for a year or so before I figure out how to wrap them up, while others never see the light of day. Occasionally I'll accidentally finish two

or three at once, and they end up stacked on the editor's desk like 747's over O'Hare.

Still stuck for time? Keep in mind you are not alone (not bad advice for just about any endeavor). I had co-writers on five of my articles, and without exception, the quality went up while the amount of writing time required went down. So share the love and bring a partner on board, particularly if you have any incomplete articles hanging around. A new pair of eyes may be exactly what the doctor ordered.

Keep in Mind ...

Be human. My articles have addressed courage and honesty, creativity and heroism, life and death, goodness and evil, all within the context of program management. This is not a dry discipline, and there is no reason an article should be bloodless and dusty. Remember: you are a person writing for other people. Robots aren't going to read your article anytime soon, so go ahead and write with human beings in mind.

Be bold. Mel Brooks said, "The audience wants the best and bravest of you. They never want you to be politically correct. They want you to be fearless, honest, and crazy." He was talking to comedians and actors, but his advice is applicable to just about anyone with a story to tell. Writing for the public can be scary, and if it's not a little scary, you're probably not pushing the envelope enough. It's important to stick your neck out a little—or maybe even a lot.

Never use humor. It undermines your credentials and makes people think you are just some clown. Perpetual seriousness is the only thing that demands respect ... nah, I'm just kidding!

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Writing should be fun to do and fun to read. There's no reason to be serious all the time. As Dr. Jerry Harvey of *The Abilene Paradox* fame put it, "Have you ever known a competent professor, preacher, politician, manager, employee, or student who wasn't funny, who didn't have a sense of humor or an appreciation of the absurd?" Your readers like to laugh, and they're more likely to read and remember something that's occasionally funny.

Respect your audience. Both their intelligence and their time. Make it worth their time to read your stuff, and don't be afraid to explore technical or otherwise intellectually challenging topics. Most of your readers will be smart enough to follow along, and those who aren't, just might learn something. Say what you have to say as clearly as you can and avoid overcomplicating things, but there is no reason to shy away from something just because it requires a certain amount of smarts.

Trust your editor. He or she has been in the business for a while, knows the audience, and knows good writing. Smart writers listen closely to what editors say. Editors really have your best interests in mind because they look good when authors look good. Everyone's article gets edited at least a little, so don't take offense if your submission comes back with a few changes. By all means, if you don't understand the reason, go ahead and ask why something was changed, and it's OK to push back if you feel strongly about something, but as a general rule, the changes an editor suggests are right on target. (Oh yeah—buttering up your editor doesn't hurt your chances of publication either—just don't be too obvious about it!)

Keep at it. You may not be satisfied with your first draft. Even if you are, take another look anyway. Keep plugging away in whatever free moments you have, and it's OK if it takes a while to finish. If the editor isn't interested, rework it, get a new magazine, or get a new blank piece of paper and start over. For that matter, start writing your second article before you finish the first one.

The Last Word

I'd like to close with a few words from that great American philosopher Steve Martin. In a chapter titled "Writing Is Easy!" from his book *Pure Drivel*, he explains, "Writing is one of the most easy, pain-free, and happy ways to pass the time in all the arts. ... I'm never at a loss for what to write. ... I would recommend to writers that they live in California. ... Finally, I can't overstress the importance of having a powerful closing sentence."

Editor's note: The author welcomes comments and questions. Contact him at wardd@nima.mil.